

DISRAELI: THE CHOSEN OF HISTORY

Uniting the Old Jerusalem and the New

PHILIP RIEFF

GEORGE SAINTSBURY thought not only that Disraeli "founded a remarkable school of fiction," but that his politics were as romantic as his fiction. The most romantic thing in Disraeli was the motivation of both his fiction and his politics, a motivation to be found in his Jewishness—his quite particular kind of Jewishness. For it was not the Jews that claimed Disraeli—Disraeli claimed the Jews. Baptized into the Church of England in what would have been the year of his Bar Mitzvah, Disraeli *chose* not to forget he was a Jew. And it was not simply a reaction to the "hostile consciousness of others," as Sartre would interpret the sense of Jewishness. Rather the hostile consciousness of others was a reaction to his perverse claim to Jewishness.

The hostile consciousness of others can best be read in three unsigned articles, probably written by Goldwin Smith, the Liberal historian and polemicist, printed in consecutive numbers of the *Fortnightly Review* from April through June 1878. "The secret of Lord Beaconsfield's life," Smith wrote, "lies in his Jewish blood. . . . Lord Beaconsfield is the most remarkable illustration of his own doctrine of the ascendancy of Hebrew genius in modern Europe. . . . Certainly a century

For Benjamin Disraeli, one critic has remarked, England was the "Israel of his imagination." It might further be said that exactly because England was for Disraeli this imaginary Israel, he was able to create in English politics and letters a new tone, a new style of life, a new cast of mind—which, ironically enough, have since come to represent the "typically English." PHILIP RIEFF, who here explores the relation between Disraeli's myth of Israel (and of himself as one of the Chosen of History) and his quite substantial effects on English society, has taught social science at the College of the University of Chicago, and is now at work on a book dealing with the sociology of politics and culture in the 19th century. He was born in Chicago in 1922.

and a quarter of residence in England on the part of his ancestors and himself has left little trace on the mind and character of Lord Beaconsfield. He is in almost every essential . . . a Jew."

One of the missing essentials was that Disraeli was a member of the Established Church. And yet he played at being a Jew far more seriously than Heine played at not being a Jew. (To play at being a Jew is usually more serious.) Disraeli, who hated the universalist rationalism of his country, refused to be accepted as simply a "man," and yet he was certainly not simply a Jew. Sartre has developed no category for him, neither "authentic" nor "inauthentic." Disraeli neither fled from nor stayed with his Jewishness: he was pushed out too early to make either choice. But he remained a Jew in a peculiar way that deserves its own study—in his nostalgia.

The critic D. H. Harding has said that the word "nostalgia" ought not to be used "unless the quality of feeling to be described is recognizably similar to the common experience of homesickness, the feeling of distress for no localized, isolated cause, together with a feeling that one's environment is . . . vaguely wrong and unacceptable." Then the word is used quite properly to describe Disraeli. His writing is an expression of an experience recognizably similar to homesickness, and Disraeli certainly felt from the very beginning of his life to the end that his environment was vaguely wrong and unacceptable. His feeling of discomfort in his environment began at home, with his family.

DISRAELI's grandfather—Benjamin D'Israeli, merchant, for whom the grandchild was named—came to England from Italy around 1748, when he was eighteen. He joined the Jewish community in London, became a member of the Sephardic synagogue of Bevis Marks, and married a Jewish girl who never pardoned him his name. Her nag-

ging self-hatred in time drove him into retirement, but not before he had made a small fortune. Her only child, Isaac, suffered the burden of never being forgiven for being a little Jew. His existence, writes the second Benjamin in the *Memoir* of his father, "only served to swell the aggregate of many humiliating particulars. [He] was not to be to her a source of joy, or sympathy, or solace. She foresaw for her child only a future of degradation. . . ."

Isaac D'Israeli became a "timid, susceptible" boy, in his youth and early manhood suffering from what his son later decided must be called something other than a physical illness. He put it down, in his famous *Memoir*, as a "failing of nervous energy." Disraeli was amazed that the best medical men for a long while diagnosed his father's illness as "consumption." "The symptoms," he writes, "are physical and moral . . . lassitude and despondency." He knew the case could not have been consumption, for he had had the same symptoms in his own early manhood. The disease was really self-hatred. "One of his few infirmities," Benjamin concludes of his father, "was . . . a deficiency of self-esteem."

DISRAELI remembered his grandmother, even in his later life, as "a demon," and the journeys to her home were the horrors of his boyhood. But he came to understand her very well. "My grandmother, the beautiful daughter of a family who had suffered much from persecution, had imbibed that dislike of her race which the vain are too apt to adopt when they find that they are born to public contempt. The indignant feeling that should be reserved for the persecutor, in the mortification of their disturbed sensibility, is too often visited on the victim and the cause of annoyance is recognized not in the ignorant malevolence of the powerful but in the conscientious conviction of the innocent sufferer."

His grandmother, he concluded, was "so mortified by her [Jewishness] that she lived till eighty without indulging in a tender expression." His father became an intellectual, the son of a rich Jew searching for mankind in libraries. He read Bayle and Voltaire, and especially Rousseau. When he had been a young boy he imagined his name was Emile,

not Isaac. He was too mild to break with the synagogue, or to marry other than a Jewess. His wife, Maria Basevi, took over the practical affairs of the family and bore him four sons, Benjamin, Raphael, Jacob, and Naph-tali, and a daughter, Sarah. Benjamin was born December 21, 1804, "or according to the Jewish reckoning the nineteenth of Tebet, 5565," as his chief biographer, Monypenny, puts it. "On the eighth day the boy was duly initiated into the covenant of Abraham, the rite of circumcision being performed by a relative of his mother's. . . ."

In 1817, when the grandfather died, Isaac agreed to have all his children baptized, and Benjamin was received into the Anglican communion at St. Andrew's Church, Holborn, July 31, 1817. Isaac had grasped at a petty reason to break with the synagogue. He gave it in an essay on "The Genius of Judaism": the "lone and sullen genius of rabbinical Judaism" cut him off "from the great family of mankind." Isaac D'Israeli spent the remainder of his life taking flight into the universal in his library, where he read and pattered all day and most evenings, and wrote such books as *Calamities of Authors*, which sold well to "the middling classes." But he himself did not become a Christian—that was no more "reasonable" than to remain a Jew. And the family name remained the same, D'Israeli. Indeed, D'Israeli had allowed the baptizing of his children only after considerable urging by a Gentile friend, the historian Sharon Turner, who convinced him that baptism would help their careers if not their souls. Civil office and much land and business were closed to Jews, not to be opened until Benjamin Disraeli himself helped do so.

THERE is no evidence that the twelve-year-old boy resisted baptism. Neither is there any sign that he welcomed it. Boys do not usually have opinions on such matters. What had happened was quite simple, and sudden—and, most of all, expedient. But the young Disraeli was certainly aware of his Jewishness. Until the year he was baptized, a man came every Saturday to the Christian school he attended and gave him Jewish religious instruction. When the rest of the boys made their daily prayer, Benjamin had to go to a corner and turn his back, as was the custom

developed at that time to take care of this sort of situation.

And there was always his name. Even after he had been received into the Church of England he had to fight his schoolmates to defend his name. The D'Israelis sent him to a Unitarian school, but even there he had to fight and they soon took him home. Benjamin stayed at home, alone, and read hard. The lonely boy decided he would be a famous man, and quickly. After all, Pitt had become prime minister at twenty-one, and Byron a star in Europe's culture at twenty-five. Young Benjamin made himself sick wondering what role to choose in order to be great.

Disraeli's father thought he ought to go into law; at seventeen he was articled to a firm of solicitors in Old Jewry. (A year later he dropped the apostrophe from the spelling of his name.) But he had already discovered another role, which he loved and which was to make him at least famous. He was writing a novel, *Vivian Grey*. And when it appeared it made him the literary lion of London, at twenty-one. *Vivian Grey*—and a period of deep depression—saved him from the law. Still, he could not decide what he was, or even *who* he was.

Troubled, he took his *Wanderjahre*, and returned home, irresolute. His depression drained him until he could not "write a line without effort." He wandered aimlessly about his father's house in "solitude and silence," unable to work enough to break the depression, but doing some reading and thinking. He worried about his appearance. "I grieve to say my hair grows very badly." Now his interest in dress became quite intense. He took to green velvet trousers, a canary-colored waistcoat, low shoes, silver buckles, lace at his wrists, and his hair in ringlets. He made himself into a complete dandy.

He lived "in perfect solitude for eighteen months." And he was "still suffering." It was the malaise his father had once suffered from, but Benjamin understood it better. In his letters, the word "ill" appears often in quotation marks. And his consequent reaction was quite different from his father's. What reading he did was in the history of the Jews. What thinking he did was of the Jews. Though every line was an effort, he began a second novel, to be called *Alroy*,

whose hero was a Jew. But he dropped this. He could not be heroic. He began another, *The Young Duke*. The young duke is young Disraeli, and both are quite despairing, even if their despair seems unfashionably Byronic now. "The drooping pen falls from my powerless hand, and I feel—keenly, I feel myself what indeed I am—far the most prostrate of a fallen race."

FINALLY, the son announced to his father what had been on his mind during the despair of all his solitudes and silences: he proposed to visit Jerusalem. This would be his cure. (Disraeli sent his heroes to Jerusalem to end their malaise.) His announcement was vetoed with all the cold calm his father could muster. Almost twenty years later, in his novel *Tancred, or The New Crusade*, Disraeli imagined how his father must have reacted to his announcement. "Why should Benjamin go to Jerusalem?" the father must have insisted to himself. "Unreasonable boy!" And if he reaches there what does he think he will find? Religious truth? Political justice? Let him read of Jerusalem in travel books for restless young gentlemen. "They tell us what it is, a third-rate city in a strange wilderness." Isaac thought it was a folly, and his wife, who was a practical woman, agreed.

But Benjamin found a way to go. Some wealthy friends, the Austens, financed the trip. And he got as his traveling companion the wealthy fiancé of his sister Sarah, William Meredith. They set out for Jerusalem in June 1830. His trip was an effort to get at himself by traveling back through his past to what he considered to be his beginning. The first important stop after England was Spain, land of the Sephardim. The next, Jaffa. He passed through Ramleh, and rode into Jerusalem in February 1831.

THE impact of Jerusalem upon him is recorded in his letters from that place to his sister Sarah; and, at a twenty years' remove, in *Tancred*.

Tancred, troubled young Lord Montacute, having always been fascinated by theology and troubled by the past, goes to find the mystery of that trouble in Palestine; it is his private crusade. If he is to go to the very beginning of his past, a learned Sephardi advises him, he must retrace his steps "from

Calvary to Sinai." When the pilgrim comes finally "within sight of Sinai" he is "brooding in dejection, his eyes . . . suffused with tears." Tancred is in a "reverie," the style, at least, if not the condition, in which Disraeli often expressed his own Jewishness—rather, his nostalgia for it. The pilgrim Tancred stands at Sinai. "It was one of those moments of amiable weakness which make us all akin, when sublime ambition, the mystical predispositions of genius, the solemn sense of duty . . . and the dogmas of . . . [religion and] philosophy alike . . . sink into nothingness. The voice of his mother sounded in his ear, and he was haunted by his father's anxious glance. Why was he there? Why was he, the child of a northern isle, in the heart of stony Arabia, far from the scene of his birth and of his duties?"

Disraeli calls it "an awful question." But he thinks he knows the answer he ought to assign to Tancred. The answer is in one of Disraeli's favorite parliamentary devices: the rhetorical question. Was he, then, a stranger there? Uncalled, unexpected, intrusive, unwelcome? Was it a morbid curiosity, or the proverbial restlessness of a sated aristocrat, that had drawn him to these wilds? What wilds? Had he no connection with them? Had he not from his infancy repeated in the congregation of his people the laws which, from the awful summit of these surrounding mountains, the Father of all had himself delivered for the government of mankind? And were not the wanderings of the Jews in the wilderness "the first and guiding history that had been entrusted to his young intelligence, from which it had drawn its first . . . conceptions?" Disraeli decides that Tancred is neither morbid tourist nor jaded young aristocrat. Tancred is here because he was here before he went to other lands. "Why, then, he had a right to be here! He had a connection with these regions; they had a hold upon him." He was not visiting a foreign land, like an educated and refined Hindu curious about Europe. He was visiting his own land, foreign as it was, "his fathers' land." Tancred's most passionate desire was "to penetrate the . . . elder world, and share its . . . divine prerogative. Tancred sighed."

Disraeli, who had written to John Murray that he might never return home, sighed and turned home. On their return trip, Meredith

died of smallpox. Sarah never married. Instead, she became her brother's devoted sister. Her brother needed all her devotion. Having failed to find himself in journalism (at twenty-one, he had been important in pushing John Murray to publish a rival to the *Times*) or in novels, Disraeli finally decided on politics—this, while he was still in Jerusalem. He returned to England "in famous condition—better indeed than I ever was in my life and full of hope and courage."

DISRAELI was twenty-eight when he returned to England. He was a famous novelist, and a bad poet. Most of all, he was a young man of letters with a public, and this had given him a precarious professional income, and an annoying habit of picking up large debts. But his sense of failure was still with him. A sense of failure, and something else, had driven Disraeli to Jerusalem. But Jerusalem, at this point, was a dream, and he knew he could have waking greatness only in action—on another blessed plot, that New Israel, this England.

Disraeli's position in English society in 1832, when he first stood for Parliament, was that of an intellectual, a dandy, an exotic. His novels had made him important to a society that, after all, did read novels. And his dandyism had made him even more ingratiating to a world that was, after all, a world of fashion. But the relation of the dandy to high society was that of a pacesetter of fashion who was also an outsider. The dandy might well be an aristocrat born, but if, like Disraeli, he was not one, he was never quite accepted—nor quite rejected.

"To enter high society, a man must have either blood, millions, or a genius." Disraeli thought he had at least genius. And he was in a hurry. He sought out the great with a purpose: to be great with them. They represented action and power. There was only one aristocracy above the English—the Jews', the universal, eternal aristocracy.

Disraeli used dandyism to legitimate his exoticism, which was his Jewishness. His dandyism merged with his Jewishness. This was the image the public had of him all his life, or at least until he became Lord Beaconsfield. The combination, Jew-dandy, gave him a name as a *farceur*, and he remains forever the Jew at play, overdressed and tongue

in cheek, piping a cynical tune. Nothing about him was assumed to be true—except his Jewishness.

THE diarist Wilfred Blunt decided Disraeli's Jewishness was the only real thing about him: "Aesthetically our good Jew was a terrible Philistine; and politically . . . a very complete *farceur*. I don't like to call him anything worse than that. . . . Only you cannot persuade me that he even for an instant took himself seriously as a British statesman, or expected any . . . to accept him so. His *Semitic* principles of course were genuine enough. For his fearlessness in avowing these I hold him in esteem—for a Jew ought to be a Jew. . . . [But] the wonder is that anyone should have been found to take him seriously . . . after such beginnings as his had been."

Disraeli's exaggerated Jewishness was a pleasure, a revenge, a resource. It was the center of his strength. Disraeli, wrote Emma Lazarus, had inherited and cultivated the pose of the Jew, "the simulated patience to submit to [humiliation, defeat, and brutality] without flinching, while straining every nerve and directing every energy to the aim of retaliation and revenge." Emma Lazarus thought Disraeli shared with Shylock, as a representative Jew of the Diaspora, "the rebellion of a proud heart embittered and perverted by brutal humiliations, and the consequent thirst for revenge, the astuteness, the sarcasm, the pathos, the egotism, and the cunning of the Hebrew usurer." As in Shylock, she found in Disraeli "the poetic, Oriental imagination dealing in tropes and symbols, the energy, or rather now the obstinacy, of will, the intellectual superiority, the peculiarly Jewish strength . . . not only to perceive and make the most of every advantage of their situation and temperament, but also, with marvelous adroitness, to transform their very disabilities into new instruments of power."

Disraeli's pose gave him his perfect grip on himself. But the price of a perfect pose is to be unknown, alone, and this was the rock-bottom price he had to pay for power. An outsider—an intellectual of sorts, a Jew of sorts—cannot let the insiders get too close to him. It would only deepen their suspicion or, at least, their confusion about him. And

confusion is the same thing as suspicion in politics.

Disraeli was an opportunist. This did not strike him as being unethical, only political. He made no bones about his opportunism. After silence, it was the highest law of politics. If he was unfair to Peel in the famous debates in which he destroyed his party leader and opened the way to make over the Tories under his own leadership, he was unfair with a clear eye that this was his main, perhaps his only, chance. Politics is a game of time. And times change. Peel knew that, too. But Disraeli knew it better. When Peel attempted to change the Tory protectionist policy, Disraeli rose to defend it. It was his chance to separate the Tories from their leader, and he made the most of it. He became the leader the protectionists had to accept, finally. No one else could speak so well for them.

BUT this was later, after Disraeli had been elected to the House. His first stand, in 1832, failed. He was too suspect. Neither party took him seriously. Opinion had it that he was a Radical. Disraeli failed as well in his second stand, and in his third, and in his fourth. By this time he had decided to be a Tory. Failure makes conservatives out of near-radicals.

The Conservative party was in a quandary when Disraeli entered it; "having rejected all respect for antiquity, it offers no redress for the present, and makes no preparation for the future." Disraeli gave English Conservatism in the 19th century its program and its purpose. To prepare for the future, a political movement must return to its past. So Disraeli believed all his life; he was a dynamic conservative. And the conception of a return to the past organized his own energies, if it did not supply them.

Disraeli's "active and real ambition" was to be a great man, even prime minister of Victoria's England. As his fiction was in some measure a nostalgia for his Jewishness, so his political ideology was founded on nostalgia for a past that Britain, like himself, perhaps, had never had.

Disraeli made the return to the past the guiding principle of his politics. The program of "Young England"—the label of his ideas before they acquired the later label

"Imperialism"—was avowedly old: "To change back the oligarchy into a generous aristocracy round a real throne; to infuse life and vigor into the Church, as the trainer of the nation . . . to establish a commercial code [this is the age of child-labor capitalism] . . . to elevate the physical as well as the moral condition of the people, by establishing that labor required regulation [e.g. protection] as much as property; and all this by the use of ancient forms and the restoration of the past rather than by political revolutions founded on abstract ideas."

This is how Disraeli viewed his political religion, from the perspective of the general preface to the 1870 edition of his novels. The return to the past—the program of Young England—was at once the expression and the distortion of his nostalgia for his lost Jewishness. Disraeli wanted to unite the aristocracy and the masses against the Whig oligarchy and the upper middle classes. He viewed the crown and the aristocracy as the protectors of the people, with the Established Church as the propaganda department—the praying section—of the state. In turn, legislation had to be careful not to cut the basis of power out from under the aristocracy. Disraeli well understood that property was power in his time: he became a corn protectionist to keep it so. What was needed was a hierarchy with sensibility, and with a sense of *noblesse oblige*; "an aristocracy that leads . . . since Aristocracy is a fact." But that Democracy—the mass age—was coming was equally a fact. Then let it be led by that older, and higher, fact—Aristocracy. In any case, this was good politics for aristocratic parties.

The industrialists and the commercial oligarchy must be rapacious in business, and so must be irresponsible in government. The Whigs cannot care for the people. Rather, they have divided England into two nations, the rich and the poor. By the *coup* of 1832, the Whigs had finally set up the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. "To acquire, to accumulate, to plunder . . . to propose a Utopia to consist of *Wealth* and *Toil*, this has been the breathless business of enfranchised England for the last twelve years [since 1832] until we are startled from our voracious strife by the wail of intolerable serfage." The Whigs, according to Disraeli, had made modern history the ugly history of class struggle. But it

need not be that way. A dedicated elite could change modern history. Capitalism, which is Whiggery to Disraeli, has divorced the idea of property and power from the idea of duty, and thus has divorced power from responsibility. But in the English past, responsibility was joined with power. The connecting link was a dedicated elite. Dedication is, after all, the price an elite ought to pay for its power and for its property.

Chartism was the first answer of the English masses to industrial capitalism. Among the politicians of the time, Disraeli alone was not afraid to hear it. He almost welcomed it. He thought the alliance of the true gentlemen and the good people was perhaps just around the corner. Let the sheep and the shepherds together stand off the wolves. This was Disraeli's program, and he tried to educate the Tory party to it. He was a first-rate teacher, but somehow the lessons failed to get across. His pupils were inclined to another tactic: to domesticate the wolves, who seemed to them much more manly than Disraeli. The Whigs, after all, were of the gentry. So the Tories refused to become Disraeli's gentlemen: they suspected that Disraeli did not know, really, what a gentleman was. He never belonged at Brooks's. And if he belonged at the Carlton—in fact to become enshrined there—he had to mount a great deal of pressure to get in. Even his friend Bentinck did not think he was a sportsman. Certainly, Disraeli knew little about horses.

BUT he knew more and cared more about politics. It was almost all of his life. Politics made his life successful, he thought. And he played politics everywhere, even where there was no politics. Disraeli was a completely political man. After race, all was politics.

As a political man with the common touch, Disraeli knew, before most of his contemporaries, the value of Public Opinion. He called it the "cry," and he always knew how to "play with a cry," as he put it. The novelist turned politician was an early modern master of mass manipulation, and the first modern politician to assert the supremacy of his art. He used the press, then the most powerful means of mass manipulation, as no other politician before him. And he was proud of his craft. "I am a Knight of the

Press," he once said, "and have no other escutcheon." This was rare in an age when politics still demanded escutcheons of a more biological, or, at least, economic, sort.

Disraeli discovered how to manage that new political integer, the People. One got along with the People in the same way one must get along with women—say, Queen Victoria. The trick, of course, is to flatter them; in fact, "to lay it on with a trowel." They will know it is flattery, but will love it anyway. Disraeli's best advice to politicians was always: "Talk to women. Talk to women as much as you can. This is the best school. This is the way to gain fluency, because you need not care what you say, and had better not be sensible."

If Disraeli gave Conservatism a grip on the public, he equally made Conservatism legitimate for the intellectuals, who are always anti-public. The point is clearer when American Toryism is compared with the British variety. As Crane Brinton has said, American Toryism is "dull and stuffy, singularly lacking in intellectual graces." Robert Taft is not quite bright enough to attract the bright young people, and Catholicism, in America, is still Irish. Disraeli gave English Toryism grace. He added books to good tobacco, drawings, and the University, even though he himself did not smoke and had not attended a university. Disraeli made politics respectable for young gentlemen, semi-skilled intellectuals, and old ladies who love literature. The image of the literate Conservative is Disraeli's work, after Burke.

The man who remade Conservative politics almost failed to become a politician. The cry "Shylock!" rose to meet him as he rose to speak. The public was put off by his "physiognomy," which seemed to them "strictly Jewish." If it was not "Shylock!" the alternative greeting was "old clothes!" And some of his opponents declared to their audiences, in asides, that they could not "pronounce his name aright."

Disraeli did not complain. He could not. In any case, he had already formulated the ruling motto of his life: "Never complain, never explain." Rather, he returned insult for insult. He gained a reputation for being a very insulting young man. Later, when he was older, his reputation was as a mysterious reservoir of cynical truculence. Aristocratic

ladies, in their memoirs, list as one of their constant fears that they would come under Disraeli's wrath.

After four tries, Disraeli was elected to the House of Commons from Maidstone in 1837. He stayed forty years. But the first speech of perhaps the greatest parliamentary orator of the 19th century ended as a humiliating farce. The hostile members met him with hoots and catcalls. It was the laughter, however, that brought him down to his seat, his speech unfinished. But his final words were a taunt he was to make good: "I sit down, but the time will come when you will hear from me."

MUCH of what England heard from Disraeli is outside the limits of this essay. Its task is rather to follow the voice to its origins, that is, to Disraeli as Jew.

On the surface, Disraeli seemed never to be disturbed by anything. This—and his talent for dramatic silences—was the mask that so infuriated Gladstone while it charmed England's salons. It was also the mask that gave face to the myth of the Jew Satanas, the "superlative Hebrew conjuror" who led poor old England by its nose.

"Someone wrote to me yesterday," Lord Acton said in a letter to Gladstone's daughter Mary, "that no Jew for 1800 years has played so great a part in the world. That would be no Jew since St. Paul; and it is very startling. But, putting aside literature . . . I have not yet found an answer." And further: "Let us . . . call him the greatest Jewish minister since Joseph."

Consciousness of Disraeli as a Jew appears in all English writing of the period and later. His biographers and the political writers of his day cannot shake their awareness of "that Oriental tendency in his nature." And they are made uncomfortable by his defiant outbursts of racial scorn for the "barbarians," who, of course, were the Gentiles, the "flat-nosed Franks" who worship a Jew, and "who toil and study, and invent theories to account for their own incompetence." The only "barbarians" Disraeli excepted from his scorn were the ancient Greeks. Nevertheless, his advice to students of civilization is: study the Jews. In the Jews, and in the Jews alone, can the exhausted Gentiles "discover new courses of emotion, new modes of expression,

new trains of ideas, new principles of invention, and new bursts of fancy."

It was the impressive, death's-head face, which *Punch* saw as the sphinx or, at least, as the face of old Jewry, that exasperated Carlyle to ask how long "this Jew would be allowed to dance on the belly of [England]." Disraeli's face fascinated—and still fascinates—Englishmen. It seems to them to express the witty, ironic, dancing character of the Jew. It was not simply his dandyism. The upper classes knew and included many dandies. Rather, it was his thin face; the "lividly pale" skin; the large "black eyes"; the long nose and heavy underlip; the jet black hair, curling near the big ears; and, finally, the stoop of a thin body. It was the face and stoop of Irving's Shylock, so popular that it has been the classic portrayal of the role from that time to this.

BUT the disturbing question of his Jewishness can best be read in the snatches of Disraeli's memoirs and in his novels. In his novels, particularly, Disraeli lifted "the veil that hides his own personality," and opened up the "hidden motives" so deep underneath his "public pretenses," as he says of the partly autobiographical character Sidonia (who is also Lionel Rothschild) in his finest novel, *Coningsby*.

One of the more significant accounts of his secret life is in his *Memoir* of his father, written as an introduction to a three-volume edition of Isaac D'Israeli's *Curiosities of Literature*. Most revealing is his fantasy about his name. He simply decided that his name came to be Disraeli because his ancestors "assumed the name . . . in order that their race might be forever recognized." Thus they would be forever D'Israeli—of Israel. Disraeli invented a romance by which his name became a deliberate emblem of dignity, a badge of pride, an irrevocable identity, a "we" to the world's "they." There are elements of his "ideal ambition"—of his Jewish fantasy life—in each of his novels. It is especially obtrusive in the rhapsodic *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy*. He writes in his *Diary*: "My works are the embodiment of my feelings, In *Vivian Grey* I have portrayed my active and real ambition: in *Alroy* my ideal ambition . . . [it] is the secret history of my feelings." In another place, Disraeli further

explains his purpose in *Alroy*: "It is meant to be the celebration of a gorgeous incident in the annals of that sacred and romantic people from whom I derive my blood and name."

Disraeli published *Alroy* soon after his return from Jerusalem. It was never one of his popular novels. The critical public judged it absurd where not unreadable. But it provoked a reaction reserved for creations less absurd than annoying. A number of parodies of Disraeli's rhapsodic attempt appeared. One opened: "O reader dear! do pray look here, and you will spy the curly hair and forehead-fair, and nose so high and gleaming eye of Benjamin Dis-ra-e-li, the wondrous boy who wrote *Alroy*, in rhyme and prose, only to show, how long ago victorious Judah's lion-banner rose. . . ." But the most furious critical baiting was done by "Thomas Ingoldsby," a famous pseudonym of the magazine world of the time. "Thomas Ingoldsby," the Reverend R. H. Barham, published a parody of *Alroy* in *Blackwood's* in 1832, calling it: *The Wondrous Tale of Ikey Solomons*—Ikey Solomons was a notorious receiver of stolen goods.

ALROY is a story of the Jews of the Diaspora. David Alroy is a "Prince of the Captivity," full of Byron and brooding on the degradation of the Jews. Alroy, of the princely people, is sick—to the Byronic verge of action—of the slavery of the chosen: "God of my fathers! For indeed I dare not style thee God of their wretched sons. . . . Thy servant Israel, Lord, is born a slave so infamous, so woebegone, and so contemned, that even when our fathers hung their harps by the sad waters . . . why it was paradise compared with that we suffer."

Alroy refuses to suffer. He prefers to lead the Jews back to power, to national identity. Disraeli sets Alroy in a number of characteristically revealing conversations. One of these is with an ex-Jew who has risen to power in the Gentile world. Alroy argues the problem of commitment with the ex-Jew, now high in government service.

"After all," Alroy insists, "thou art a [Gentile]."

"No," the ex-Jew, called Lord Honain, answers.

"What then?"

"I have told you, a man." Honain asserts

he is neither Jew nor Gentile, and that most of all it is foolish to belong to a frail minority. It is better to belong to the strong majority; there is power, there is chosenness. Alroy has only one answer. Power is not the predicate of chosenness, but chosenness of power.

"We are the chosen people."

"Chosen for scoffs, and scorns, and contumelies. Commend me such a choice," Honain answers.

Alroy stubbornly commends the choice to him. Further, he insists to the ex-Jew that he cannot now understand the Jews. Honain is too well off, too strong, and so he cannot understand why the Jews must fight for power. The fight for power is clearest to those who are powerless but superior: the Jews.

"The world goes well with thee, my Lord Honain. But if, instead of bows and blessings, thou like my brethren, wert greeted only with cuff and curse; if thou didst rise each morning only to feel existence a dishonour, and to find thyself marked out among men as something foul and fatal; if it were thy lot, like theirs, at best to drag on a mean and dull career, hopeless and aimless, or with no other hope or aim but that which is degrading, and all this too with a keen sense of thy intrinsic worth, and a deep conviction of superior race; why, then perchance, [you] might discover 'twere worth a struggle to be free and honoured."

Alroy's brooding discomfort, and the guilt he feels at his inaction, is ended when he kills a Moslem who has tried to violate his sister, Miriam. He flees into the hills, to the retreat of the militant rabbi Jabaster, who is his ideologue. The rabbi instructs him in his mission: to raise the Jews first to revolt and then to independence. But first, Alroy must make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The fantasy at the "Tomb of the Kings" in Jerusalem is the most remarkable in the pattern of fantasies in Disraelian fiction. Solomon incarnate appears and hands down to his descendant, David Alroy, the rod of leadership. David returns to raise the revolt. With Jabaster as his chaplain, he leads the Jews to triumph. Alroy is, indeed, a Prince. But power, of course, corrupts him. He wants to be Alexander instead of David.

"The world is mine: and shall I yield the prize, the universal and heroic prize to realize

the dull tradition of some dreaming priest and consecrate a legend? . . . Is the Lord of Hosts so slight a God, that we must place a barrier to His sovereignty, and fix the boundaries of Omnipotence between the Jordan and the Lebanon? . . . Universal empire must not be founded on sectarian prejudices and exclusive rights."

SEEKING power for his people, Alroy had become intoxicated with it for himself. The Prince of the Captivity was corrupted by the vision of power in a Gentile world. He marries a Gentile, the daughter of the Caliph, and makes Baghdad his capital. When it becomes apparent that he has abandoned his Jewish ambitions for other pleasures, Jabaster leads the Jews in revolt against him. This gives Alroy's wife the opportunity she has wanted to eliminate Jabaster, who is beheaded at her insistence. Finally, the Moslems defeat Alroy, and he is sentenced to death by the restored Sultanate. However, he is offered his freedom if he will renounce his Jewishness. This last irony amuses him. His refusal to renounce religiously what he had already renounced politically is his near-final affirmation of Jewishness.

But his final affirmation is more positive. Failure has taught him more about his Jewishness than success. What had been fatal, for him, Alroy now understands, was his attempt to de-Judaize himself. He makes what he considers to be a historical analogy: "The policy of the son of Kanesh—'twas fatal. He preferred Egypt to Judah, and he suffered." Alroy is a convinced Jew now, even more than he was when he was an ambitious Jew. His ambition is now for the Jews. In the same speech, he continues: "Sires, the Lord has blessed Judah; it is His land. He would have it filled by His peculiar people. . . . For this He has by many curious rites and customs marked us out from all other nations, so that we cannot at the same time mingle with them and yet be to Him." Alroy comes to what proves to be the final conclusion of his life: "We must exist alone." The Jews are meant to "preserve this loneliness." Loneliness is "the great and holy essence of our law."

The other side of the Jews' historic loneliness is Zionism. Alroy comes to understand this in what is perhaps one of the earliest

Zionist perorations given in Western literature. He is asked what he wishes for the Jews:

"You ask me what I wish? My answer is: a National existence, which we have not. You ask me what I wish? my answer is: the Land of Promise. You ask me what I wish? my answer is: Jerusalem—all we have forfeited, all we have yearned after, all for which we have fought—our beautiful country, our holy creed, our simple manners."

But Alroy is troubled by the thought again, that the Return may be the Jews' last illusion. "Is there no hope?" he asks himself. His answer is to quote the Prophets, that religious hope exists most of all in the hopeless situation: "The bricks are fallen, but we will rebuild with marble; the sycamores are cut down, but we will replace them with cedars. . . . Yet again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O . . . Israel!"

ALROY is a confession. It is an assertion that the Jew is the clue to history, and its demiurge. But the most passionate statement of Disraeli's fantasy of Jewish chosenness is made by his most romantic character, the Jew Sidonia in the novel *Coningsby*. Sidonia is Disraeli's affirmation of the myth of the super-Jew, superior because a Jew. Disraeli insists: "Race is everything; there is no other truth." Sidonia is proudest that he is "pure" Sephardic—for him, the Sephardim are the purest Jews. Sidonia is Disraeli, although he is made to look like Lionel Nathan Rothschild, who was to become the first man to enter the English Parliament as a Jew; that is, without having to take his seat "on the oath as a Christian." Guedalla calls Sidonia, in a try at a joke, "Disrothschild."

As Disraeli's proudest projection, Sidonia is the most powerful, the most learned, the most shadowy man in the world. He is also the loneliest. Sidonia is an alien, detached, without intimates or a permanent home. It is his homelessness that makes him intensely interested in the problem of political and cultural stability.

Disraeli offers in Sidonia a character who has the insight of an outsider. But his insight and his power are pathetic—for they must be the insight and the power given to an outsider who can never quite use his superiority to bring him into a community. His power

and insight are the masks, the weapons, of his detachment. Sidonia "was admired by women, idolized by artists, received in all circles . . . and appreciated for his intellect by the very few to whom he at all opened himself; for though affable and generous, it was impossible to penetrate him; though unreserved in his manners, his frankness was limited to the surface. He observed everything, thought ever, but avoided serious discussion. . . . He looked on life with a glance rather of curiosity than contempt. His religion walled him out. . . . He perceived himself a lone being. . . ."

This is the image Disraeli accepted for his own self: walled out, a lone being. But Sidonia chooses to remain walled out and to turn his loneliness and exclusion into a premise of insight. Disraeli turned his own loneliness into both a pride and a political tactic. Yet the lonely, proud man titillated himself with the fancy that English Jewry found a secret, private joy in him, whispering among themselves that "he is one of us." The Jewish hero, walled out from the Jews as well as from the Gentiles, nevertheless is aware of his irrevocable connection with the Jews.

DISRAELI, in his fantasy, saw in the Jew the demiurge, as well as the measure, of history. Sidonia expresses this: "The fact is you cannot destroy [us]. It is a . . . fact, a simple law of nature, which has baffled Egyptian and Assyrian kings, Roman emperors and Christian inquisitors. No penal laws, no physical tortures can effect that a superior race should be absorbed in an inferior, or be destroyed by it. . . ."

Sidonia insists that the Jews are not only the super-race, but now and always responsible for whatever is great and good in history, despite the attempt of their inferiors to degrade and to destroy them. The Jews, according to Sidonia, are superior by more than force of intellect. The Jews are favored with genius by nature, as a divine gift. Try as the Gentiles might to destroy them, the Jews are indestructible. They are the intermediaries between man and God, the divine "link" that gives to mankind its humanity, the priestly people in a world that would be best organized as a theocracy.

Disraeli avowed Sidonia's manifesto for his own in the famous twenty-fourth chapter

of his political biography of his friend Lord George Bentinck, which repeats many of the same things. This chapter, quite out of place in the story of Bentinck's life, is a wholesale defense of the Jews, past, present, and future, and an unqualified assertion of their superiority over other "races." Disraeli's belief in the Jew as the indestructible hero of history led him to claim for the Jews every historical glory of Western civilization. Christianity, at its best, is a Jewish religion, and what is not best in it is not Jewish. He could not allow many pages to pass before he must repeat one of his favorite taunts: that, after all, the Gentiles worship a Jew and a Jewess. This is also the taunt of his beloved heroine, the Jewess Eva in *Tancred*. The taunt was meant as a challenge delivered by Disraeli in his own name to the Gentile world.

The Jew is chosen for eternity, Disraeli proclaims in the same chapter of his *Life of Bentinck*. He does not know too much of Jewish theology or history—or of Christian theology or history, for that matter. For Disraeli, these are all lumped together as the "great Asian mystery." But knowledge, he thinks, is not so necessary to insight as faith. Neither as prime minister nor as a proto-Zionist did Disraeli allow lack of information to inhibit his certainty. He is sure that the Jews, "sustained by a sublime religion," are the chosen of the earth. Each Jew proves his chosenness. Opportunity makes him the Tory prime minister of Great Britain. Persecution makes him a revolutionary leader in Europe. It does not matter what the world does to Jewry, Jewry always gives proof of its chosenness.

BUT Disraeli has still to answer a taunt returned to his own taunts: that he, D'Israeli of Israel, was a convert to Christianity. Disraeli gave a Jewish answer to an impossible question. *He* the convert? A *converted* Jew? It is the Gentiles who are the converts, he answers. And that is something that in their confusion about the real nature of Christianity they quite forget. The answer is, admittedly, not equal to the question; but it has its cogency.

To Jews who thought themselves "better" converted, Disraeli showed an icy humor. He saved some of his sharpest irony for those "young ladies" who are "ashamed of their

race, and not fanatically devoted to their religion, which might be true, but certainly was not fashionable." And he directed what he hoped were his most telling thrusts at the most sophisticated, and so the most vicious, type of assimilationist. This was the "animated" creature who "was always combatting prejudice" and who "felt persuaded that the Jews would not be so much disliked if they were better known." All they had to do, Disraeli minced, "was to imitate as closely as possible the habits and customs of the nation among whom they chanced to live. . . ."

Like many more modern Jewish intellectuals, Disraeli wrote partly to protect himself against the completest assimilation: the loss of his own consciousness as a Jew. Assimilated before he could choose another way, he hated assimilation. A master of practiced nonchalance all his life, he could barely tolerate the "practiced nonchalance" of the assimilationist ladies of his time. He expected a good woman to be "enthusiastic for her race" and unashamed, at least, of her religion. The first requirement for the role of heroine in his novels is that the lady be loyal to her "old faith," whatever that "old faith" be. This accounts for the affection he displays in his novels for noble old Catholic families, and for loyal young Catholic ladies.

But the Catholic heroine is simply a variation of the Jewish; of Eva, in *Tancred*, and of Miriam, the sister of Alroy. Catholicism, as a loyalty, appeals to him because it is a loyalty in the midst of disloyalties. The Jews are alone in the world as the Catholics are alone in Protestant England. Loyalty is the one characteristic a Jew cannot give up and still remain a Jew. The test of loyalty is to continue to live separately, no matter what the temptations of victory or defeat. "The Hebrews have never blended with their conquerors," says Eva to Tancred, proudly. In his novels, the heroine is the vessel of loyalty—a quality that makes his good women altogether flat, always superior and virtuous. Miriam is a better Jew than her brother, the great David Alroy; Disraeli dedicated *Alroy* to his sister, Sarah.

FINALLY, Disraeli made the Jew the image of what he thought to be his own politics. The Jews, he decided, "represent the Semitic principle; all that is spiritual in our nature.

They are the trustees of tradition, and the conservators of the religious element. They are a living and most striking evidence of the falsity of that pernicious doctrine of modern times, the natural equality of man." The Jews are the "natural aristocrats" of man. Disraeli's entire "education" of the Tories was to recall them to the responsibility of their aristocracy, as trustees of the English political tradition. And his image of the English aristocrat was struck off from the image of the Jew. Disraeli insisted that the dynamic of English culture was its Hebraism. "Vast as the obligations of the whole human family are to the Hebrew race, there is no portion . . . so much indebted to them as the British people. It was the sword of the Lord and of Gideon that won the boasted liberties of England; chanting the same canticles that cheered the heart of Judah amid their glens, the Scotch, upon their hillsides, achieved their religious freedom. [And] who is the most popular poet in this country? Is he to be found among the Mr. Wordsworths and the Lord Byrons . . .? No; the most popular poet in England is the sweet singer of Israel. . . . There never was a race who sang so often the odes of David as the people of Great Britain."

Disraeli's sense of the past made him a consistent advocate of aristocracy as the decisive basis of English politics, and of the Jews as the aristocracy of history. In *Tancred*, he calls the Gentile world sordid, and he makes Sidonia dismiss Gentile Christianity as an immature imitation of the peoples with a master past. The past and the present, as Sidonia says, "explain each other." The Christian clergy knows "nothing about these things. How can they? A few centuries back they were tattooed savages. . . ." Politics and the-

ology, Sidonia concludes, are not yet within the mastery of Christian civilization. They require "an apprenticeship of some thousand years at least; to say nothing of clime and race."

DISRAELI was often sentimental and could move himself to tears by his own words. But his sentimentalism was the hardest thing inside him. Sentimentalism, in the form of nostalgia, defines his politics and his fiction. It represents his sense of the past, and of his chosenness in it. It gives him his ideology, and has had a hand in shaping British political rhetoric, and Zionist rhetoric since then. (Churchill's epigrammatic, nationalist sentimentalism is straight from Disraeli, not from Gibbon, as some students of Churchill's rhetoric think. Gibbon was neither a sentimentalist nor a nationalist.) Disraeli felt himself twice chosen, as a Jew and as an Englishman, a representative of the Old Jerusalem and the New, the past and the present united.

Disraeli was pleased to make his sense of chosenness the basis of his politics throughout his life. His belief in the mystery of Israel's chosenness gave him a basis for his belief in his own chosenness in English politics. It gave him the necessary aggressive mystique he needed to survive in English politics, a unique achievement for a man in his position, unrepeated in England since. Disraeli did not simply hint at the doctrine of election, he asserted it. And his prophecy to England was a romantic conservative vision, like Cromwell's, of England, that blessed plot, as a New Israel. It was Disraeli's nostalgia for his Jewishness that enabled him to present this vision in English political history.